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FM AMEMBASSY RABAT
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RUEHAS/AMEMBASSY ALGIERS 4776
RUEHAM/AMEMBASSY AMMAN 0609
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0090
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 0556
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 2358
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS 0724
RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA 0863
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 3602
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 5973
RUEHKM/AMEMBASSY MANAMA 1037
RUEHMS/AMEMBASSY MUSCAT 0142
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 5025
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 0695
RUEHYN/AMEMBASSY SANAA 1227
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 3530
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI 0307
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 9614
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 4068
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 0137
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 RABAT 000416

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/08/2018

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SUBJECT: MOROCCAN GOVERNMENT SUSPENDS AL-JAZEERA BROADCASTS
FROM RABAT

REF: 07 RABAT 1799

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas T. Riley for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: The Government of Morocco (GOM) claims that its sudden decision to suspend Al-Jazeera's right to transmit its nightly Maghreb news broadcast from Rabat came as a result of Al-Jazeera's long-standing failure to secure a proper broadcast license. Most independent observers discount this technical explanation, offering a variety of possible political reasons for the GOM's action, including that Fouad Ali El Himma was behind the decision due to his pique over commentary critical of his political followers. The practical impact of the GOM's decision is very limited, however; Al-Jazeera continues to report freely from Morocco and indeed is using its nightly Maghreb news bulletin) currently airing directly from Doha) to broadcast commentary and interviews slamming the GOM for its decision. The only short-term implication is that Al-Jazeera cannot broadcast its Maghreb news from its Rabat studio. End summary.

Al-Jazeera Maghreb News Bulletin Suspended

¶12. (U) On May 6, Al-Jazeera reported that the Moroccan authorities had suspended its license to broadcast from Rabat. Notification occurred four hours before the Tuesday evening broadcast was to be aired, via a fax from the National Agency for Telecommunications Regulation (ANRT) to Al-Jazeera's Rabat headquarters. The fax cited technical reasons, without providing further details. Al-Jazeera had been broadcasting a nightly hour of news focused on North Africa at 2200 GMT since November 2006.

¶3. (U) Up to and including the day of the launch of the Maghreb news bulletin in late November 2006, Al-Jazeera was not positive that the Government of Morocco (GOM) would permit the broadcast to proceed. The dispute revolved (and continues to revolve) around the nature of Al-Jazeera's presence. Under Morocco's new broadcast law, any entity (foreign or domestic) wishing to broadcast from Morocco must incorporate a local company, and submit a license request to the Higher Audiovisual Communication Authority (HACA) for approval. The submission must include a "cahiers des charges" (terms of reference), which inter alia outlines the type of programming to be broadcast. (Note: after the broadcast law was passed, the USG had to go through this process to secure a license for Radio Sawa to operate locally, a process that took over a year. End note.)

¶4. (U) From the beginning, Al-Jazeera contended that the broadcast law did not apply, as Al-Jazeera was transmitting the Maghreb news bulletin from its headquarters in Doha, even though the studio and the announcers were in Rabat. The GOM never accepted this technical loophole, but did not prevent Al-Jazeera from launching its new broadcast. Since then, the GOM has provided a succession of provisional three-month licenses, while renewing its demand for Al-Jazeera to formalize its presence.

¶5. (U) Following the May 6 decision, the GOM was initially unwilling to provide further information about the

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suspension. On May 8, however, a Moroccan daily with ties to the Government quoted Communications Minister and Government Spokesperson as saying that Al-Jazeera's broadcast had been "suspended, not banned." He stated that "the suspension has technical causes; it is imperative for Al-Jazeera to regularize its legal and technical situation with HACA." Naim Kamal, a prominent journalist and HACA board member, provided the same explanation. He cited a legal complication in Al-Jazeera's case, however, wondering whether it would be possible to limit its terms-of-reference to apply only to one hour of programming a day, when the channel broadcasts 24 hours a day throughout the world.

Political Theories Abound

¶6. (S) Neither Al-Jazeera nor the independent press is buying the GOM claim that the suspension was purely technical. Al-Jazeera has long had a testy relationship with the GOM (and indeed the local media in general), coming under fire for reporting on issues ranging from Moroccan elections to Western Sahara. Since the launch in 2006, there have been repeated rumors that the GOM was on the verge of closing down Al-Jazeera and/or evicting its Dutch/Morocco bureau chief Hassan Rachidi, most recently in November 2007 amidst allegations that Rachidi had been in contact with Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) leadership (reftel). Most analysts therefore believe that the recent GOM decision was politically motivated.

¶7. (SBU) What precipitated the move is hotly contested, however. The most common explanation, posited by analysts on Al-Jazeera and by several Moroccan dailies, is that the GOM was piqued over commentary made by veteran Egyptian journalist Mohamed Haykal, host of a weekly program on Al-Jazeera entitled "Ma'a Haykal" (With Haykal). Haykal, long a virulent critic of the late King Hassan II, used his show last week to air old accusations about Hassan II's historical ties to Israel, and his alleged collaboration with French authorities in the kidnapping of Algerian resistance figures in the 1950s.

¶8. (S) A second theory) advanced in print on April 8 by independent daily Al-Massae) revolves around a recent

Al-Jazeera interview with Adellatif Hosni, publisher of the Moroccan magazine "Wijhat Nadar." Hosni lashed out at Moroccan political leaders who have aligned themselves with the political movement of Parliamentarian Fouad Ali Al Himma, calling them "lugata'" (an Arabic word meaning "orphans," but with derogatory connotations, such as "bastards"). Without citing this specific broadcast, a Gulfi businessman with media ties told Ambassador Riley that El Himma was behind the closure.

¶19. (C) Taoufiq Bouachrine, editor-in-chief of Al-Massae, wrote that it was an accumulation of coverage, including the items cited above, that led to the GOM's decision. However, Reda Benjelloun, producer for 2m television, told us there was no political motivation, noting that the GOM had weathered substantial critical coverage from Al-Jazeera for years, and none of the recent stories had been substantively any different.

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Next Steps for AJ

¶10. (SBU) Al-Jazeera Rabat bureau chief Rachidi told us that Al-Jazeera will pursue the licensing procedures demanded by the GOM (indeed, he told Reporters without Borders that Al-Jazeera had already submitted the license request, but HACA had not yet acted on it). He had been unable to get the GOM to provide a specific reason for the suspension beyond the technical one, and hoped it was only a warning.
"Considering the way it was been presented to us," he said,
"I don't think there will be a turning back." In the meantime, Al-Jazeera would be relying on its bureau in Mauritania to manage the Maghreb news bulletin.

¶12. (SBU) Ironically, Al-Jazeera had only days earlier taken an editorial decision to advance its Maghreb news bulletin by one half hour and incorporate it into its prime-time "Harvest of the Day" news broadcast, which begins at 2000 GMT and reportedly has a nightly audience of 16 million. This decision came after Al-Jazeera had received numerous complaints from North African viewers that the 2200 GMT broadcast time was too late for most North African viewers (for whom it started at 2300 local time or later).

Harsh Press Commentary

¶13. (SBU) Al-Jazeera is having a field day with this event, broadcasting commentary from Moroccan political analysts as well as numerous man-on-the-street interviews critical of the GOM decisions, and favorable towards Al-Jazeera's decision to devote an hour of news to the Maghreb. Moroccan print media commentary, albeit very limited, has also criticized the GOM decision. For example, Islamist daily Attajdid wrote in an April 8 editorial: "It seems that some circles do not care if Morocco makes reforms towards democracy. It seems that those who decided on the ban have not (thought) seriously about the implications of the decision. What if Libya and Algeria were to exploit that decision and host Al-Jazeera on their own territories? What a shock it would be to Moroccans if Al-Jazeera moved its bureau to Nouakchott!!"

Comment

¶14. (C) The truth of this story most likely resides somewhere in the middle between technical and political. There is no doubt that the GOM wants Al-Jazeera to be properly licensed, as this would bring its broadcasts (and possibly not just those from Rabat) under the regulatory auspices of HACA, providing a point of reference for any

future legal proceedings. For example, Al-Jazeera would be required to follow HACA guidelines guaranteeing equitable coverage during Moroccan elections, something Al-Jazeera was exempt from during the 2007 national elections. Arguing in favor of this technical explanation is the fact that the GOM has taken no steps to prevent Al-Jazeera from conducting and broadcasting critical interviews with Moroccans, from Morocco. Thus the GOM is allowing Al-Jazeera to air far more regular and sharp criticism of the GOM than had recently been

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broadcast.

¶15. (C) That said, it is difficult to imagine the decision was purely technical. While Al-Jazeera had been warned to regularize its presence, it had been given no deadline and had never been told that suspension was imminent. It seems likely the GOM used the technical question to fire a shot across Al-Jazeera's bow, most likely precipitated by the criticism of Al Himma's followers. This fits in with the GOM's modus operandi with regard to the press: allow a great deal of freedom of expression, while providing regular reminders that the GOM has the power to yank (sharply) on the leash whenever it wants. End comment.

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